

## THE ETHICAL VISION OF GERALD MURNANE

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Today, I want to develop a reading of two of the novels of Gerald Murnane. I will support the claim that *The Plains* (1982) and *Inland* (1988) are not interpreted productively by deconstructionists. Murnane's fiction might remind us of Derrida, certainly, but deconstruction is not able to explain it satisfactorily. The work of Imre Salusinszky on Murnane is not 'future-directed': it does not allow us to read his texts with any sort of historical anticipation (let alone an ethics) (1989, 1993). One of the things that interests me is the proleptic energy found in Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987). I will be working in this paper with Carter's version of 'spatial history', largely through reference to the criticism of his work by Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs in their recent article 'Uncanny Australia' (1995). It is not my intention to take a side in this particular debate; rather, I want to weigh both positions in each hand (as it were), in order to distil from them some useful ideas about difference, space/place and discursive strategies.

My aim is to produce out of this intersection a revised version of 'nomadology' that insists on the link between it and space, and can be derived with most clarity from the seventeenth-century philosopher Spinoza (Deleuze 1983; Spinoza 1670, 1677). The late twentieth-century figure who expresses Spinoza's position in this matter most effectively is Julia Kristeva (1980). As paradigms of structure, deterministic thought and completeness if ever there were any, Spinoza and Kristeva might seem odd choices for the project of 'making strange' nomadology. Commonsense would tell us that these two, as 'anti-examples', could only make Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari entirely familiar to themselves. But I am not trying to read nomadology against itself, not attempting to deconstruct it from the inside in order to go beyond it (but not really), to transcend it (but not really). It is rather precisely the anti-Deleuzian elements of their thought that constitute Spinoza and Kristeva as potential voices of a very distinct inflection of nomadology.

What most disappoints me about the 'Australian Writers' study of Murnane is Salusinszky's failure to show the political value, (I am tempted to say the political urgency), of reading his subject via the tropes of deconstruction (1993). In brief, he cannot show any such value or urgency, and so he pretends he does not have to, as I will now explain. The very possibility of political action is absent because of a far from innocent confusion in this text between what can only be an arbitrary interpretation of Australian culture, and the 'infinite series' that all cultures are (particularly post-colonial ones, we might add). The reader feels an implication by Salusinszky that Murnane has only passively identified the definitive truth about culture, and is therefore like a medical doctor, albeit one stuck at the level of diagnosis: 'this is the way it is!'

By this token, Salusinszky's Murnane has no responsibility for what he merely observes; without a cure, he is nevertheless not responsible for the disease;

not a partisan of our confinement within masculine *différance* (MacCannell, *Figuring Lacan: Criticism and the Cultural Unconscious*, 1986, 22). A discrete interpretation (Salusinszky's) takes the place of Murnane's fiction (potentially open to all readings), something reflected in the title of the former's study: 'Gerald Murnane' becomes Gerald Murnane. And by extension he is regarded as a window onto culture, not one who operates on it incompletely through the politics of writing. Only one version of culture is to be allowed and it is to be this one; strangely, it is as if the phenomenological reduction has never occurred for a text that returns to it time and again.

We are confronted here with an appropriation of deconstruction that has no sense of the autonomy or 'outside' of culture, freezes its critical apparatus, and leaves to chance its concrete political effects; although for me the deconstructive technique is not the most useful theoretical prosthesis with Murnane's interests anyway. And so I have been arguing for an occlusion of any political path from his texts to Australian culture by Salusinszky only because, to my mind, it is the most obvious symptom of the actual and significant theoretical and political mismatch between Murnane and Derrida.

Salusinszky certainly strikes a very ambiguous tone in the opening moments of serious criticism on Murnane. At least one critic, however, finds his thesis internally coherent and persuasive in a way that I do not; but Ian Adam offers as a more general criticism of what he calls "signifier fixation", a flawed argument for the *referentiality* of Murnane's texts (1991, 25). Referring to C. S. Peirce's theory of the icon, Adam suggests that "what seems to be arbitrary is less the lexical 'sign' than the Saussurean choice of it as the privileged unit definitive of the basic principle of language" (Peirce 1991, 1992; Adam 26). And on this basis, he argues that the larger the unit of language considered in *The Plains* the greater its similarity to equivalent units in other texts, and therefore (for him) the more pronounced its referentiality. But surely there is a problem here: similarity does not mean referentiality, does not imply a fusion of the signifier with the signified, or the sign with the referent. Horizontal equivalence is not vertical equivalence. To this extent, our suspicion that Adam is really only interested in genre theory is confirmed by his failure to explain what he actually understands by referentiality beyond the occurrence from text to text of the same generic conventions.

Adam's contribution, therefore, does not succeed in refiguring Salusinszky's relation between Murnane and Derrida, so in order to do this myself I now want to approach *Inland*, initially by way of Sue Gillett's pessimistic reading of it (1990).

In her article 'Loving and Hating the *Inland* Reader: Postmodern Ploys or Romantic Reaction' Gillett objects that Murnane's text attempts to make substantial the narrators' masculine selves at the direct expense of the abused and ignored women for and to whom (supposedly) *Inland* is written. In this very complicated novel, two narrators, or (as we come to suspect) perhaps two versions of the one narrator, mourn through their writing two young women who have been sadly exploited at different times and on opposite sides of the globe (one in Hungary, the other in Melbourne). *Inland*'s, in a sympathetic interpretation,

a love-letter that — not least by explicitly contrasting the intended and deserving readers with a hated rival reader — produces a type of communion, in both cases, between writer/lover and reader/lover. I would even say there occurs an abasement of the masculine consciousness of the novel as the necessary sacrifice that brings to life, in to loving and writing presence, the lost women. Gillett, however, does not read it this way at all:

The various women characters do not exist independently of [the narrator's] perception of them and his claim that they can read their stories in this book draws attention away from the narcissism and the self-restoration which underly this quest for a reader, this writing-as-rescue operation. . . . This success remains grounded in the semantic construction of the text, a linguistic success dependent on a complicated interplay between the terms dead and alive, writing and reading [emphasis mine] (60, 67).

What other type of success can a novel be if not a linguistic one? we could be excused for asking. All in all, therefore, Gillett reduces a very sophisticated text to a banal example of the Romantic tradition, which often employs 'woman' as the silent condition of the masculine sublime.

For me, however, *Inland* is an evacuation of the claims of the Symbolic Order of masculine language. Juliet Flower MacCannell's analysis of the limit point of the abject in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* might prove useful here ('Kristeva's Horror', 1986). MacCannell points up what she calls abjection's "deadly limit", the moment when certain avant-garde texts turn back on themselves and produce, from their centre, a vacuum of silence or non-language, as in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's ellipses . . . the three dots (347). Kristeva is aware of this: "The negated and frightened desire for the One as well as for the Other produces a symptom of destroying hatred directed toward both" (180).

But how are we to understand this "abject of desire" for Kristeva ('Kristeva's Horror', 347)? To begin with, she links abjection to the figure of the One which, in psychoanalytic theory, is the condition of the structure of desire generated in the One's relations with the Other. To the extent that abjection disrupts the more familiar organization of the One and the Other, it reverses desire and sends it rushing back to its origin in the One. Unlike the Other, however, the One is not infinitely receptive to, or absorbent of the flow of desire. Desire only extends to the Other asymptotically: the One, on the other hand, is immediately and instantly present to the reversal of desire. To this extent, the irruption of abjection can only lead to the utter collapse of both categories.

In short, as MacCannell makes clear, with abjection "the transference can only go the other way, the wrong way: can writing love its reader" ('Kristeva's Horror', 347)? In my view, *Inland* is certainly an example of writing that loves its reader. Murnane's novel is not in Kristeva's avant-garde tradition; but his attempt to 'write backwards' (as it were) allows us to infer that *Inland*'s structure is distinct from the endless proliferation of desire characteristic of différance. Rather, we are confronted here with a text that wants to be a vacuum, wants to exist only

outside and at a remove from itself. In Inland this rush back into the One is motivated by the female readers, but what is essential is the more general evocation of another space in a tension with the putative text. This might be the most appropriate index of Murnane's uniqueness in Australian literature: his writing is future-directed; it somehow anticipates without at all circumscribing the existence of a different space of discursivity, by continuously evacuating itself from itself.

Such an idea of 'writing backwards' is also at work in *The Plains*, which insistently empties itself into a linguistic vacuum. How else to interpret a novel about a young film-maker who sets out to record the elusive nature of the plains, and yet does nothing but write notes on them? Surely an empty camera or projector implies another space external to the text, just as a "blank screen" does: "It was my own decision to stand before the spectators at my earliest revelations with only a blank screen behind me and an empty projector pointing at me. . . ." (121). Such a reading might also give substance to John Tittensor's otherwise merely rhetorical description of the plains as characterized by "a forceful ambiguity. . . possibility rather than actuality" (1982, 524). In similar vein, Salusinszky comments that "they are that place without dialogue that Murnane's books have always wanted to become" (1993, 50).

With this in mind, we can go to a consideration of Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* and the article 'Uncanny Australia' by Gelder and Jacobs, which criticizes Carter's text. To think about these apparently straightforwardly-opposed positions is a good way of introducing the concept of nomadology.

It would not be unfair to say that both these academic texts are mainly to do with the relations between various types of difference and sameness and the problems of space/place; which dialectic produces, in each case, a choice of discursive strategy for post-colonial Australia. In particular, what is under notice here is the political tension separating an imperial version of history mediated through place from a more strategic spatial history. While Gelder and Jacobs make explicit reference to Freud's 'uncanny', their article actually reads, on closer inspection, more like a considered defence of deconstruction against Carter's alleged seduction by binary oppositions. Of course, the connection between Freud and Derrida proposed here is hardly controversial in itself, but what makes this initially trivial slippage of significance is the way it seems to lead to a more fundamental uncertainty over the nature of both Carter's project and, by reversal and of more interest to me today, Gelders and Jacobs's own.

In 'Uncanny Australia' we are offered many versions of difference: for example, the 'uncanny', Derridean différance, incompleteness, incommensurability; and a number of expressions of sameness: for example, reconciliation, and attention to the privileged excluding term of binary thought. How are these terms distributed through this article? Uncannily, and against all expectations, Carter's work as represented by his critics appears entirely Derridean, while Gelder and Jacobs, to the extent that they search for "an alternative way of writing history", come across as seduced by binary thought (158)! They think they are post-

structuralists, but are not; and in a second twist Carter is accused of not being what he actually is: a critic of difference who deconstructs white texts in order to found a post-colonial history of space. On this last point, Gelder and Jacobs take particular issue with Carter's choice of a colonial explorer's journal as the "template" for his spatial history, but surely this is a Derridean tactic antagonistic towards the fantasy of an original aboriginality (154-55). Similarly, their two observations that, one, a return to such a mode is impossible (which would be nothing new to Carter), and, two, that Carter's text 'plays out' such a return by ending "precisely where the modern nation began: with the arrival of the imperial project" are clearly reactions to Carter's choice of the sort of deconstructive paradox or 'dumb-show' that often becomes the 'yeast' for the activation of difference (156, 158).

However, the debate over difference itself in this Australian corner of post-colonial theory appears bankrupt; and this is why I am not taking a side here: it is no longer possible; each position is inhabited by the other (is this Freudian? or Derridean?), and Gelder and Jacobs are not so much wrong, as a symptom of what is wrong. (Where difference in Salusinszky is plainly unself-conscious, here it is simply exhausted.) If a critical piece as otherwise astute as 'Uncanny Australia' fails to see its own putative argument in the substantive argument of another critic (Carter), and therefore risks redundancy, then perhaps we need to consider a new version of spatial history and difference that works not via dissemination (or binary thought), but through what I have been calling evacuation. Carter's spatial history is a convenient term to describe what new discursive strategy might be required here, in the form of a space that would at least resist deconstructive proliferations of language. This brings me to the revised version of nomadology with which I want to conclude this paper.

Nomadology is a discursive practice that identifies with the structures of guerilla warfare and the rhizomatics of heterogeneous 'lines' and root systems as a means of combating the totalitarian State. It depends on the notion of a large division of people, a crowd, a gathering, for its effects. To this extent, the way Spinoza and Kristeva implicate certain of their texts with the 'activated' presence of a mass of people might therefore allow a connection between these critics and nomad thought. Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* each express, at first glance, no more than a deterministic theory of human relations (developed via psychoanalysis and the divine respectively), and therefore do not appear to add to our understanding of nomadology. But wait! These texts do not both draw on the Jewish nation only to produce history as myth, as many commentators have mistakenly argued: I read them as future-directed in that they draw the putative text they accompany out of itself, (that is, they evacuate it), and as ethical because what accompanies this process of evacuation is precisely what seems to get left out of consideration by Spinoza and Kristeva: the internal aliens of the state like women and refugees.

You might ask how I can support this claim that Spinoza and Kristeva give us a model for the sort of evacuation of the text — a 'becoming' of space — that I have already observed in *Inland* and *The Plains*. The complex relations of the three

levels of knowledge in Spinoza's *Ethics* provides an answer (Part II, Proposition 40, Note II, 68-69). Philosophers ('men of reason') occupy the second of these levels, where they are dogged by the third: that is, the level of imagination, inadequate words and uncertain passionate experience: a 'womanish' space. The first level is connected with God or Nature (the same thing for most Spinozists), but it is a subtle difference between God and Nature that must be emphasized here. Now God is certainly the model for humankind's reason, but as the philosopher grows in reason, he simultaneously becomes more remote from the substance of Nature. When a man has communion with God as a pedagogic model (by an increase in his reason), he actually draws away from the substance of Nature; but to the extent that a woman or an alien man is remote from God as a 'teacher' — due to the supposedly baleful influence of the passions — she or he draws closer to the substance of Nature. God can be imitated in the attribute of thought, but the substance of Nature can only be occupied, precisely at the expense of (masculine) reason, by (feminine) aliens.

If we go just one step further and substitute the effects of the Jewish nation in the *Theological-Political Treatise* and *Powers of Horror* for the substance of Nature as the external yet active element of the *Ethics*, we produce a model for the constant evacuation of both of these texts, as well as those by Murnane I have considered. In cultivating their reason — and thus drawing away from the substance of Nature through being guided by the attribute of thought — men surely grow in power, but do they not also feel the ground swept away from under them, as women and those men governed by the passions come into contact with the substance, the quiddity of Nature? And do these so-called aliens encounter there what we might call a spatial history in the space left behind or the one found? or both? a proleptic and abject space? One might protest that women are here once again in the not unfamiliar Romantic role of the passive condition of masculine reason, but for Spinoza the substance of Nature is 'Natura Naturans' (active nature) while the attribute of thought is part of 'Natura Naturata' (passive nature); and on this basis we can recast in an active expression, for example, Gillett's pessimistic reading of the women of Inland (1677, Part I, Proposition 29, Note, 25).

Spinoza and Kristeva help us read Murnane's fiction without either recalling an outdated Romantic ideal, or 'begging the question' of difference and otherness through the resort to deconstruction.

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